Deciding What to Do - Applying Systems Theory

I. Decisions and Systems

How does a church make decisions? decide on a budget? choose a Sunday School curriculum? pick the hymns for the next quarter? select among candidates for rector? pick a design for a new sanctuary? Very often with great dedication and a careful look at its visions and goals and the alternatives presented.   By God's grace, many of the church's decisions have left it stronger and more vital. Sometimes though, the decisions made have turned out to be less than optimal, resulting in wasted resources and wounded spirits.

Jesus' parables demanded thinking and reasoning from his listeners, along with feeling. He provoked them to consider the world beyond themselves and to relate to it. The Good Samaritan and the Master and the Ten Talents come to mind. A theory is a framework, an abstract metaphor, that attempts to explain something else; it calls for the same kind of thinking and reasoning that Jesus expected. It can be used to enable us to choose our goals and the strategies to achieve them so that we live more according to our values. How to incorporate some basic systems theory into the thoughtful prayer that precedes deciding what action to take is the theme of this article.

II. What Is a System?

A system is a collection of *elements* - people and/or things - organized to function interdependently so that it accomplishes some specific purpose. It has *structure* and *rules of operation*, both subject to intentional or unintentional change. It also has *boundaries* which define what the system includes, and an *environment*, which can affect it but which it can only influence, but not control. A system is called *open* when is affected by its environment and may influence it, but cannot control it. The Body of Christ may be considered a system (1 Cor. 4 and Eph. 4:11-12), as can individual congregations and also their functioning parts. Systems that are part of other systems

may be referred to as *subsystems*. The world and the church are complex and so systems can also overlap each other.

III. Using Systems Thinking

A. What Is the Issue That Needs Resolving?

Describe the problem that has been raised. What needs to be changed or eliminated or newly formed?

Let us consider two composite examples. In Example A, the volunteer group of retirees that has been assembling the Sunday bulletin and the monthly newsletter has been slowing down so that the church secretary has had to stay late to finish the Sunday bulletins and members of the congregation have received their newsletters too late to attend the meetings mentioned. It was suggested that since the congregation has grown, the job was too big for a volunteer group and the printing and assembly should be contracted out. In Example B, a complaint was raised at the governing body meeting that the congregation was being kept in the dark, that the written material left out significant information, particularly related to how money was disbursed.

B. Describe the System Involved

What are the functioning parts and how do they interact?

Both examples deal with the congregation's communication system, which might at first be described as consisting of the Sunday bulletin with its inserts and the monthly newsletter and those involved in producing them, to the end that parishioners have the information they need in order to participate in the congregation's life. In Example A, the system included the parish secretary, who typed and duplicated the printed matter and the volunteer assemblers, and the material and equipment they worked with. This might be termed the distribution subsystem. The writers who wrote it were peripheral to the issue and the readers were involved only because they were not receiving the

product in a timely fashion. In Example B, distribution was not involved but the inclusion of content was and the writers and some readers appeared to be the principle actors because some expectations with regard to content were not being met. On reviewing what actually happened, the process of including or excluding written pieces and the editing of what was submitted were remembered - so that these functions and the individual who performed them were noted. In each case the system's description, including its boundaries, was determined by the specific problem at hand and a deep delving into what actually happened and who and what were involved and also the whole environment, that is, the context of the problem.

IV. Describe the Relationship Systems Involved

Who are in people involved and how do they interact with each other?

In describing the system in question - before even thinking about what action to take, attention should be paid to the fact that congregations are made up of people who relate to each other on an emotional as well as on a functional level. Superimposed on the functional systems in a congregation are the relationship systems, which involve two or more individuals interacting with each other emotionally. That interaction can be based on complementarity or opposition or similarity. A relationship system can exhibit patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. A system that tends to return to some established pattern is said to be in *homeostasis*. Behavior patterns of groups and of individuals in the congregation, automatic reactions or chosen responses, can be observed and analyzed in terms of our need to be separate from other human beings and our need to be close to others. As in families, some patterns tend to be repeated, so that past history is a factor. Taken together the established behavior patterns of a church describe its culture.

Anxiety is an inevitable part of the interaction of people. It can provoke innovative, thought-based change but at a high level can prevent it. The over-anxious continue to react even after the situation changes. An individual may also transfer his or her anxiety from one person to another, causing an unhealthy situation called triangling. The more

an individual is self-aware and can differentiate himself or herself from another or others and the forces in play, the more he or she can maintain a healthy balance between being a separate person and being close to others. Self-differentiation is the key to thoughtful response, as opposed to anxiety-driven automatic reaction to circumstances, and hence to the reduction in that anxiety; it is particularly important in leaders.

Inclusion of the emotional aspect of problems, based on an awareness of the whole relationship system in the congregation and its relevant parts, can make the description of an issue or problem complete, and thus increase the chances that the solution chosen will actually improve the situation.

V. Explanations Uncovered and Used to Enlighten the Decision-making

To go back to Example A in the previous section, it was discovered that younger members of the congregation had, in their enthusiastic managing of new endeavors, excluded the older folks from the planning and hence did not incorporate them into activities. Then when some of them heard themselves heatedly accused of nonparticipation, they became anxious about their place in the congregation and lost their enthusiasm for accepting responsibility and contributing their effort.

In Example B, it was discovered, on reviewing the operation in detail, that the new congregation secretary, whose job it was to assemble the Sunday bulletin and the monthly newsletter, did not know that her predecessor had always called the treasurer and asked for the expenditure information that was supposed to be published. Editorial oversight was nonexistent so the bulletins and newsletters were distributed with the expected figures omitted.

In each case carefully describing the system led to an understanding of the cause of the problem and hence increased the chance that the action decided upon would improve the situation. Thus, how we describe our system - be it the communications or financial system or Christian education or building expansion - affects the quality of the decisions

we make about it and determines to a great extent the success or failure of the actions we choose to carry out.

-- Janet M. Malcolm

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